

## Brings Me Back by littlewitchhazels

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**Summary:**

Strange, really, to think of the old days, when nothing really mattered. Nevertheless, Joyce couldn't help but allow herself to be swept up in the wave of nostalgia and bittersweet memories that overcame her in the quiet moments. It was nice to indulge herself in such luxuries every once in a while, when things got tough.

Alternatively: Joyce recalls standout moments from her more carefree days.

## Brings Me Back

Strange, really, to think of the old days, when nothing really mattered. Nevertheless, Joyce couldn't help but allow herself to be swept up in the wave of nostalgia and bittersweet memories that overcame her in the quiet moments. It was nice to indulge herself in such luxuries every once in a while, when things got tough.

She cast herself back to the eerily quiet schoolyard — an empty world that seemed almost out of place compared to the noisy scene one would usually associate with the open area — the way it always was when all the boisterous kids had even herded away into their classrooms. Joyce recalled with a smile the glassy-eyed stares of old classmates during those last few periods of the day, just waiting to be freed from the cramped classrooms and stuffy teachers. In a way, you could almost call the deserted schoolyard peaceful. Still, there were stragglers — why wouldn't there be? She was one of them! — shuffling amidst the collection of parked cars that lined the pavement.

It was easy enough to sneak through the halls and past the buildings, finding yourself out in the open and away from the monotony of the classroom's teachings. Most of the time, teachers didn't give a shit and you could probably count on your classmates not to snitch (given that they weren't skipping, themselves). In any case, the only torture the teachers could provide in lieu of skipping fifth and sixth period was the painful boredom of detention. Even that, as terrible as it would seem at the time, was survivable. You were guaranteed to get caught at least once or twice, but everyone got smart after that. Well, 'smart' was a generous way of putting it, but damn did it make them feel untouchable! What she'd give to have that stubborn bravery of her youth once more.

Even as one hand bounced nervously against her thigh, Joyce was always confident in her march across the empty schoolyard of Hawkins High, easily ducking under windows and keeping close to the walls when she had to. The path and all its obstacles were almost ingrained in her memories. All she had to do was walk. Every now and then, she'd throw a cautious glance over her shoulder, but really

there was never anything to worry about so long as she kept light on her feet.

In all honesty, she probably could have walked the whole way with her eyes closed; Joyce was willing to bet that even now, some twenty-odd years down the road, she still could have done it. Just one more turn and there: The steps around the back of the school, thankfully devoid of any other skulking students. Maybe there was some other stomping ground for the no-good miscreants of Hawkins High, but the thought of seeking out some other sheltered haven never crossed Joyce's mind back then. Either way, past residents had already left their marks with the cigarette butts that littered the ground and the streaks of ash that smeared the concrete. Joyce had always cautioned one last peek around the area before ducking under the steps. It never hurt in the long run to be just a little more cautious.

Usually, that in itself was enough — an instinct learned after one too many dull detentions, and from the fretful thoughts lingering at the corners of her mind — but every once in a while it simply wasn't enough. Joyce would never forget that day Mr. Cooper caught her and Hopper smoking under the steps.

Her fingers were tapping against the rusted support she leant against, drumming out a nervous tune as she stood waiting for what felt like a goddamn eternity. *Come on, where is he, where is he, where is he?* She was always first, used to always be the one waiting until the fateful day she simply stopped coming. That was just the way it always was: She'd tap out her anxieties for a few achingly long minutes, slowly drifting into her own fluttering thoughts, and then — "Christ, Hopper! You scared the shit out of me!"

He would just appear out of thin air! As bizarre as it seemed, considering her parter-in-crime's towering frame and broad shoulders, he had a way of dropping in completely unnoticed by her. On reflection, maybe she was just a little too wrapped up in her thoughts to realise; kind of a shitty quality for the self-proclaimed lookout to have.

On the days he jumped her, Joyce would smack Hopper square in the chest with a tiny balled-up fist. Hopper, without even flinching,

would always laugh at that. That was another strange thing about remembering, realising that she hadn't heard that deep, rumbling laughter in years. The thought made her heart ache.

"Gotta keep your eyes open, Joyce." He'd warn jokingly.

She rolled her eyes at that, a playful smile tugging at her lips. She never realised back then how much he loved those moments, when she'd smile at him so sweetly. Perhaps part of her truly was playing up for the camera, but the fact that they never quite made it past 'very good friends' said otherwise. As he ducked under the steps to join her, Joyce threw one last glance over Hopper's shoulder before her eyes were drawn to the pack of Camels he'd fished out from his back pocket.

Hopper barely had time to light the damn thing before Joyce would inevitably snatch the cigarette from between his teeth, taking a long slow drag before leisurely handing it back to him with a smug look plastered on her face. "So... Playing hooky again, Hop?"

It was one of their running jokes, the facade of obliviousness at each other's constant presence and dedication to their shared smoke breaks. He'd always give her a look, halfway between amused and something else that she could never quite place, but he never said anything about it; Hopper just laughed, and plucked the cigarette from between her fingers, wading it between his teeth with a lazy smile. "I could ask you the same thing, myself."

"Very funny." She drawled, watching as a plume of smoke escaped his lips.

And that was how they would remain — most of the time, at least — exchanging friendly jabs at each other amidst the general silence. There was never really a need for words when they were together, just the presence of each other was enough. And the shared pack of smokes, too. Sometimes she'd ask about his mom, then he'd ask about her dad. They'd laugh, sigh, and sink back into their comfortable silence before their stilted conversation would start all over again as if there hadn't been a ten minute lull that split their conversation right down the middle.

They'd just settled into one of their brief snippets of conversation, laughing quietly over some dumb story Hopper had recounted about something she couldn't quite remember, when all of a sudden they were so rudely interrupted by exasperation at the youths of the generation turned to wrathful irritation.

"Hey, assholes!"

Joyce could have sworn she jumped a foot in the air at the sound of the booming voice that shook the once peaceful space in an instant. On that occasion, she'd instinctively grabbed the front of Hopper's shirt and twisted it so tightly in her fist that, for the rest of the day, the fabric of his white shirt became hideously wrinkled just below the left armpit. Whipping her head around in one fluid motion, she caught a glimpse of an advancing Mr. Cooper brandishing a threatening fist as he came closer and closer. After a moment of fumbling, Joyce grabbed Hopper's wrist with her free hand and jolted the cigarette from his fingers. "Run!"

And so they ran. She whisked Hopper away with a giddy peal of laughter as they dashed out from under the steps and tore down the paths towards the main buildings of the school. Not once did she relinquish her iron grip on Hopper's wrist, nor did he as he twisted his hand to grab her own wrist in the midst of the chaos. Every now and then, when they came to a shuddering halt for a split second decision of which turn to take, his hand would come up and hover over her shoulder, poised to usher her forward if need be. And no matter how great his long strides were, she could always keep up.

Through twisting hallways and past silent classrooms they went, their footsteps clattering against the linoleum floor, unable to fight the euphoric whoops and frantic shushing that punctuated their sharp breaths. As lovely as the silence was, there was something so thrilling about the chase — tangled up in each other's arms, huddling together in one useless hiding spot after the other — that brought the widest of smiles on both of their faces.

Joyce was almost winded by the force in which Hopper suddenly changed directions and pulled her into an empty classroom, slamming the door behind them with just a bit too much strength than was necessary. They pressed their faces to the small window in

the door — Hopper's chin digging into the top of Joyce's head, their breaths fogging the window — in one last cautionary effort. It was only then, when they were satisfied that Mr. Cooper had given up the chase, that Joyce pried herself away from Hopper and fell to the ground with her back pressed up against the door. Her chest rose and fell with each gulping lungful of air, and she remembered thinking how she'd never ran so hard and fast in her life. "Holy shit..."

Hopper slumped to the ground next to her in an equally breathless state. For a moment, their eyes met and all of a sudden they were laughing again. They laughed, and laughed, and laughed until their cheeks hurt from smiling so brightly.

That was what they called 'life-or-death' back in the day. Simpler times.

After they'd finally calmed down and caught their breaths, Joyce vividly recalled the moment Hopper brought a hand down to squeeze her knee in playful reassurance before using it as a support to stand up on shaky legs. Yes, their friendship had always been something of a touchy one — with lingering hands on forearms, arms looped around shoulders and waists, and a playful shove or two — but she couldn't quite stop thinking about just how warm his hands were when they caressed her skin. He must have said something to her when he offered her a hand, but she hadn't heard it.

It was just a moment, one of many shared between them, that instantly passed as soon as Joyce had carefully tucked it away into a quiet corner of her mind for later contemplation that she never quite got to.

A moment quickly forgotten by the time Hopper had hauled her back on to her feet and caught her as she stumbled on the spot, laughing softly at the almost drunken wobbling that came with each step. And once again they're pressed up against each other's side arm in arm, somewhat lopsided due to the almost ridiculous height difference, stumbling out of the classroom on a mutual unspoken decision to skip the rest of the school day.

They could deal with the consequences of their antics tomorrow.

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Most of their days weren't so hectic or filled with brimming excitement that came with hallway chases and unquenchable laughter. Mostly it was just quiet chatter and prolonged silences that never lent itself to anything other than the closeness of their friendship.

And then there was one time, a time that felt like forever ago, when he'd leaned in and brushed his lips so softly against hers... Joyce had thought that he was going to tell her that he loved her. Strange, how clearly she could recall the smell of cigarette smoke on his breath, the closeness of their bodies, and the fluttering sensation in the pit of her stomach. Something made him stop, pull away hesitantly with his gaze cast almost shamefully to the floor. *I'm sorry*, he'd said, *best forget it*. So she did, for a while, buried it away with all the other moments when he started seeing other girls and she started dating that scumbag Lonnie.

Now, however, she remembered it. And Joyce wondered if he did too.

#### **Author's Note:**

I hope you enjoyed! If you have any thoughts/comments, I'd love to hear them! And if you want more of my writing why not check out my tumblr @littlewitchhazels :)